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AUTHOR Hirsch, Jameson; Ellis, Jon B.
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ABSTRACT

The dramatic increase in suicide in the past 30 years, especially among young people ages 15 to 24, has prompted numerous investigations into its cause. Research on suicidal ideation involving college students shows that this population may be especially at risk and this paper examines the effects of the college environment, family support, and demographics on older adolescents' suicidal behaviors. Researchers asked 385 adolescent undergraduates, mean age 20.5 years, to complete a demographic questionnaire and a Suicide Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ). Sixteen percent of respondents described themselves as "serious" ideators, while 59 percent were seen as ideators. Women indicated more suicidal thoughts than did men. Statistical analyses revealed that the type of care giver a person reported having while growing up accounted for a significant amount of the variance on ideator status. Serious ideators were more common among single parent households. This result suggests that suicidal behaviors may occur due to a complex interaction between social factors and childhood care. The difficulties which often accompany childhood in a non-traditional home, including loneliness and social isolation, may promote less-adaptive coping skills. When exposed to a stressful situation, like college, these persons may be unable to cope effectively and thus become hopeless. (RJM)

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Family Support and Other Social Factors Precipitating Suicidal Ideation

Jameson Hirsch and Jon B. Ellis

East Tennessee State University

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ABSTRACT

To examine the effects of family support and demographics on suicidal behavior, 385 subjects completed a demographic questionnaire and a Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ). Sixteen percent described themselves as "serious" ideators, while 59% were seen as ideators, numbers consistent with past suicide research. Multiple regression analyses revealed that the type of caregiver a person reported having while growing up accounted for a significant amount of the variance on ideator status. Serious ideators were more common among single parent households. Although many demographic variables were assessed, only the primary caregiver a person had as a child impacted their status as a suicidal ideator. This suggests that suicidal behaviors may occur due to a complex interaction between social factors and childhood care. The influence of living in a single-parent home may contribute to whether or not a person considers suicide.

Family Support and Other Social Factors Precipitating Suicidal Ideation

Suicide has been a growing public health problem over the last several decades, due to a dramatic increase in occurrence. Young people, ages 15 to 24, claim suicide as the second leading cause of death for that population and have a suicide rate which has more than tripled in the last forty years (P :, 1989). Many people in this age range are also attending college. Although some research suggests that persons attending college may be at less risk for suicide than those who do (Kraft, 1980; Bernard and Bernard, 1982), various studies have shown that for individuals attending college the risk may be significantly greater (Rudd, 1989; Westefeld and Furr, 1987; Smith and Crawford, 1986). A recent investigation indicated that fifty percent of college students surveyed reported seriously considering suicide or having attempted suicide sometime in the past (Neyra, Range & Goggin, 1990). The elevation of suicidal ideation in a college setting may be due to a variety of influences, including separation from family and home, stress of academic demands and increased alcohol or drug use (Bonner & Rich, 1988). It seems necessary to examine further the effects of the college environment on older adolescents and to assess it's influence on suicidal behaviors.

Of particular concern are individuals from non-traditional or "broken" homes. The effects of being raised in a non-traditional home may contribute to maladaptive psychological development. Older adolescents raised in a home with divorced parents endorse less reasons for living than do adolescents from two-parent homes (Ellis & Russell, 1992) and feel less responsibility to their families (Connell & Meyers, 1991). The disruption of a home, whether through divorce or the death of a parent, may cause adolescents to adopt new roles, coping beliefs or strategies, and expectations about their lives. Such roles and strategies may be useful and even helpful during the period of time surrounding and following the break-up of the home. However, without adequate family support such behavior patterns may develop in a maladaptive fashion, presenting difficulties for the individual later in life. Older adolescents attending college, who are also from non-traditional homes, may experience higher levels of stress or anxiety than those raised in traditional homes, as a result of separation from their normal support network.

Demographic research regarding suicide and suicidal ideation has been successful at identifying high-risk groups (Rudd, 1989) and may assist in the improvement of collegiate or community-level intervention techniques, allowing therapists to intercede more effectively on the behalf of individuals exhibiting suicidal behaviors.

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Method

Subjects: Subjects were 385 older adolescent aged undergraduate students (248 women, 137 men) enrolled at a southern university. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 48 years of age, with a mean age of 20.5 years.

Instruments: Subjects were asked to complete a standard informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire and a Suicide Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ). The demographic questionnaire describes individuals according to such factors as age, sex, ethnic group, alcohol/drug use, marital status, past exposure to suicide, whether or not they were raised in a single-parent home and their primary caregivers as children. The SIQ requires subjects to check one of four categories: category one, "I have attempted suicide in the past", two, "I have seriously considered suicide in the past", three, "The thought of committing suicide has crossed my mind, but I have never seriously considered it", four, "I have never thought of committing suicide." Subjects who answered one, two or three were classified as suicide ideators. Subjects who answered one or two were seen as "serious" ideators and at risk for suicidal behavior.

Results

Of the 385 subjects, 23 fell into category one, 39 in two, 164 in three, and 159 in four, on the SIQ. Approximately 16% described themselves as "serious" ideators, while 59% were seen as ideators. Among ideators,

women (n=36) endorsed "serious" ideation more frequently than did men (n=26).

Multiple regression analyses were performed on ideator status using most of the demographic information as variables. The type of caregiver that a person reported having as a child (2 parents, 1 parent, etc.) accounted for a significant amount of the variance on ideator status, $F(1,83)=5.03$, $p<.05$. Serious ideators were more common among single-parent households, $x^2(1,n=385)$, $p<.005$. Among ideators 27% reported being raised in a non-traditional home, compared to 13% of non-ideators. Although many variables were assessed, only the primary caregiver a person had as a child affected their status as a suicidal ideator.

Discussion

The results are consistent with past studies which have examined suicidal behavior among young people. Women revealed themselves as suicide ideators more often than did men. As in previous research, the occurrence of suicidal behaviors were found to be influenced by the caregiver an individual had as a child, whether two-parents, a single-parent, grandparents or other nurturers. Individuals raised in non-traditional settings endorsed higher levels of suicidal ideation. This supports findings that individuals from disrupted family environments are more likely to consider suicide as a viable method of coping (Rudd, 1989). This suggests that suicidal behaviors may occur as a result

of complex interactions between social factors and childhood care.

The influence of living in a single-parent home may contribute to whether or not a person considers suicide. The difficulties which often accompany childhood in a non-traditional home, including loneliness and social isolation, financial difficulties and emotional turmoil may promote less-adaptive coping skills (Linehan et al., 1983). When exposed to stressful situations, such as college, these individuals may be unable to cope effectively and become hopeless, thereby increasing their risk for suicidal behaviors (Dixon, Heppner & Anderson, 1991). The positive effects of being raised in a dual-parent home may include enhanced nurturing and more extensive support systems.

It seems necessary to examine further the increasing demands placed on families and adolescents by their environments, including parental marital and employment status, financial burdens and increased stress. The effects of such demands appear to play a role in a person's decision regarding whether or not to commit suicide.. A comparison of the family dynamics and factors involved in single vs. dual-parent homes may provide better insight regarding suicidal behaviors in older adolescents.

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